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SUBJECT: ELECTIONS: KRASNOYARSK AS BELLWETHER?

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Summary -----

¶1. (SBU) If Krasnoyarsk is an electoral bellwether, as observers here claim, the five political parties which made it into the regional assembly in voting April 15 may be the ones to make it into the State Duma in December. The ruling pro-Putin United Russia party, led in Krasnoyarsk by popular incumbent governor Aleksandr Khloponin, scored a clear win, gaining over 42% of the vote. The Communist Party came in a strong second with 20%. For a Just Russia, the newly-created leftist pro-Putin party -- intended to draw away support from the Communists -- fell short of expectations, gaining 12%. Zhirinovskiy's LDPR also received 12%. The Liberal Union of Right Forces -- the party with the shakiest chances of making it into the Duma in December -- received over 7%, while enduring "black P.R." Embassy visited Krasnoyarsk April 10-12 to gauge the pre-election environment. End Summary.

Khloponin: Local Hero -----

¶2. (SBU) Governor Aleksandr Khloponin delivered, as expected, a strong victory for United Russia (YR) in the April 15 regional elections in Krasnoyarsk. (Krasnoyarsk, Russia's second largest region in land area, has a population of three million.) United Russia received over 42 percent of the vote. YR did even better in voting for the 26 directly elected seats in the 52-seat regional assembly, winning almost two-thirds.

¶3. (SBU) During conversations with a range of politicians, civil society representatives, and officials in Krasnoyarsk April 10-12, we heard near-universal praise for Khloponin's leadership. Even leaders from opposition parties such as the Union of Right Forces and Yabloko credited Khloponin with being an energetic and capable manager. We frequently heard support for the idea that Khloponin -- who is only 42 and has a fortune from his earlier association with Norilsk Nickel -- has Presidential ambitions. While praising Khloponin, competing parties were, however, adamant that his incumbency and use of the administrative apparatus gave YR an almost insurmountable advantage.

A Just Russia Falls Short -----

¶4. (SBU) A Just Russia, the left of center pro-Putin party created in late 2006, fell short of its expectations on April 15. A Just Russia leaders whom we met in Krasnoyarsk April

12 told us they expected to get 18 percent. Focusing on social issues such as pensions and other subsidies, they hoped to eat into the base of the Communists and finish second. They predicted that the Communists and LDPR would get only 10 percent each. (As noted, the result was: Communists - 20%; Zhirinovskiy/LDPR - 12%.)

Low Turnout Favors Communists

¶5. (SBU) Turnout in the election was 34.4%. Observers in Krasnoyarsk expected the low turnout and anticipated it would favor the Communist party (KPRF). KPRF, all agreed, remains the party of choice for the many pensioners nostalgic about the USSR. The Krasnoyarsk Elections Commissioner told us April 10 that pensioners had a 70% turnout rate - double that of the general population. He noted this skewed the election to the issues most on the minds of retirees: social benefits and pensions.

Union of Right Forces

¶6. (SBU) The Union of Right Forces (SPS) leadership both alleges irregularities in the election and is accused of committing them. A week before the election, police raided all the offices of SPS in Krasnoyarsk region following an accusation that SPS activists had been offering to pay a bounty to some who would deliver voters. SPS denied the charges, saying all its activities were legal. An investigation continues.

¶7. (SBU) Meanwhile, SPS leader Sergey Shachmatov told us April 11 he expected falsification of election results. He said SPS had been victim of a "black P.R." campaign. Unknown forces distributed materials discrediting SPS. In another instance, on April 11 Krasnoyarsk TV carried reports that someone had spray-painted "for Belykh" (SPS national leader)

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throughout much of downtown Krasnoyarsk city.

¶8. (SBU) Shachmatov said that SPS stood a good chance in Krasnoyarsk since it was the only true opposition party. SPS got over 7% - well above the 5% threshold for entry into the regional assembly. On election day, Shachmatov alleged that other parties had padded their voting lists with "dead souls."

Pre-election atmospherics

¶9. (SBU) United Russia and A Just Russia activists were visible throughout Krasnoyarsk city during our April 10-12 stay. Both parties had teams of brightly uniformed young people handing out materials and waving large party flags. We noticed only one other such team, for SPS, outside the university. LDPR had only billboards around town, featuring Zhirinovskiy. The Communists had almost no visible presence. We saw one KPRF billboard. United Russia and SPS dominated paid TV coverage. SPS ads featured party leader Belykh or made an appeal to pensioners. An LDPR ad simply had a grim-faced Zhirinovskiy barking at voters to vote for him if they had any sense. United Russia's Young Guard sponsored a concert outside city hall the night of April 11. (The event seemed, however, to serve as more of a backdrop for teens drinking beer in public than to stir up passion for YR.)

Public outreach

¶10. (U) In addition to meetings with political party leaders and regional and city officials, we gave a talk at the State University and met with about 20 civil society representatives. We also met with Open World and other exchange alumni and called on the Chamber of Commerce.

Comment

11. (SBU) United Russia no doubt hopes that Krasnoyarsk is a bellwether for the December election to the State Duma. It would be premature, however, to assume that A Just Russia has peaked. Indeed, the party did better in a number of regional elections on March 11. The Communists continue to have a loyal base, helped by low turnout. SPS's ability to get over 7% should give it encouragement for December. With "against all" not an option this year, the harassment SPS endured may have helped it earn some of the protest vote. Finally, it is clear that Governor Khloponin is a politician to watch, with a possible future on the national scene.

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